

Minorities, women profit from business mentoring

Program helps small suppliers win \$1.2 million in new business

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Opportunity Advance, a mentor-protege program sponsored by the Greater Greenville Chamber of Commerce, reached \$1.2 million in business generated in less than a year, officials said Tuesday.

The program, designed to assist diverse-owned suppliers in connecting with large corporations, had set a goal of \$1 million to be reached by December 2004. The current campaign ends in August, with a new one expected to begin in October, said Timika Nesbit, the Chamber's manager of small and diverse-owned businesses.

Jack McCauley, executive director for materials management at the Greenville Hospital System, said GHS "was trying to grow its business with minority- and women-owned businesses" when it became involved in Opportunity Advance.

Although mentoring can be time consuming, it helps both the large corporations and the small business, he said. But "it has to make good business sense to any organization" before it will work, he said.

Ricardo Studart, president of Synesis International Inc., said the process has introduced him to people but it has not yet generated revenues for the company. He has realized, however, that he needs to imaginatively expand his business beyond its core to meet the needs of potential clients, he said. "It has taught us a lot. It has taught the mentors a lot, too," he said.

Susan Lill, vice president and co-founder of Aerie Engineering, said Opportunity Advance is instrumental in helping small businesses learn how to open doors with key decision makers. "We sometimes don't have the time or resources to drill deep into a large corporation," she said. She said she has added \$85,000 in revenues to her business because of Opportunity Advance.

Pat Reynolds, branch manager of Management Decisions Inc., said the program helps small businesses learn how to be competitive. "This is not about set-asides, not about free business," she said. "This is about inclusion and how to be competitive."

McCauley said the process must become self-perpetuating and he challenged others to become involved with Opportunity Advance. "It has changed the way we do business," he said.



Making connections: Lori Morton and Susan Lill from AERIE Engineering, Jack Macauley from the Greenville Hospital System and Thomas Draughn and Lamont McEntyre attend a Diversity Business Event at the CCB building sponsored by the Greater Greenville Chamber of Commerce. Staff/Ken Osburn